



## **Accountability for Charter Schools is a Must**

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**Michigan House Education Committee**

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Michigan desperately needs to expand high quality educational opportunities for our children. Too many of our public schools are broken, and far too many young people graduate unprepared for college and a career – if they make it to graduation. Our inability to effectively educate all our children requires significant, yet responsible, change.

A hopeful sign has emerged – potentially transformative legislation in Lansing – but my hope is tethered cautiously. The legislation, a package of seven bills, would remove the state cap on charter schools, allow community colleges to authorize charter schools outside of their geographic boundaries, enable the development of charters in districts with graduation rates of 75% over the course of three years, exempt charters from property taxes, and permit charters to opt out of their district's collective bargaining agreements.

That's a lot of policy speak for a simple outcome: if this legislation passes as is, it is conceivable that one day we will have more charter schools than traditional schools in Michigan.

As someone who has devoted many years to reforming Michigan's education system, I recognize the critical need for high performing charter schools. They provide new, innovative education options for our children – especially when our state's traditional public schools consistently fail to effectively educate our students.

Not all charter schools, however, are great. Just as performance varies among traditional high schools and among colleges – and just about every other broadly classified group – so too does it vary among charter schools. With wide variation in performance, we will not serve the interests of Michigan's children by creating charter schools simply for the sake of creating charter schools. That, unfortunately, is what this legislation in its current form would allow.

Michigan needs an effective, responsible process for creating new charter schools, and authorizers are the key. Whether charter schools reach their full potential depends in large part on the oversight of the authorizers and our ability to hold them accountable for performance. New schools should not be authorized blindly – we cannot approach public education like subprime lenders during the mortgage crisis.

As written, this legislation lacks the oversight and accountability mechanisms for charter school authorizers, which could enable the creation of many new schools that simply fail to meet the needs of their students. Certainly, some of the new charters would be excellent, but recent data suggests that many would likely be no better than traditional schools. Without accountability measures in place, there would be no way to ensure that we're getting the good ones.

Last week I testified in front of the State Senate Education Committee on behalf of Michigan's children. My goal was to clearly show that this legislation can be a powerful force of change, but only if the legislature drafts and enacts it correctly.

It is not enough that authorizers commit to closing underperforming schools after three to five years. What happens to those children during those years and after the school is closed? What effect will those three to five years of inadequate education have on hundreds, if not thousands of children? Who will be held accountable for the decision to authorize a charter for such schools? What are the consequences?

I call on the State House to add safeguards so that no child becomes the victim of a failed charter school experiment; I call on the House to put in place strong accountability provisions that permit authorizers to only issue charters to those school operators that have a solid track record of educating students – or those operators that can demonstrate the sound reason and research behind their approach; and in the interest of transparency, I call on the House to require authorizers to report annual academic progress for each charter to determine if the schools are making progress towards the goals established by their contracts.

Michigan's children cannot afford for adults to make misguided decisions now. Charter schools are an important part of the solution to the serious challenges we face, but we need a responsible framework for creating and assessing new schools. With an effective system in place, we can work toward our common goal of giving every child an excellent education.

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